

Bulgaria

Information provided further the statement by the Lanzarote Committee Chair and Vice-Chairperson on stepping up protection of children against sexual exploitation and abuse in times of the COVID-19 pandemic

➤ The existing **National Telephone Hot Line for Children 116-111** is available to all children and their families, to whom psychologists listen, support, direct callers on all matters of concern to them, and in the meantime, at child risk data, contact immediately the authorities for the protection of the child, depending on the scope, for investigation and action and protection measures, with the State Agency for Child Protection monitoring the measures taken until the risk for the child is eliminated.

➤ On March 17, 2020, in implementation of Art. 32, para. 6 of the Radio and Television Act, Council for Electronic Media, State Agency for Child Protection, Association of Bulgarian Radio and Television Operators, Bulgarian National Television and the Bulgarian National Radio **undersigned 2020 Agreement for the Protection of Children from Content, which is unpleasant or creates a risk of damaging physical, mental, moral and/or social development.**

In relation with the introduction of State of Emergency in the Republic of Bulgaria of March 13, 2020, as a precautionary measure against the spread of the COVID-19 coronavirus, a decision was made to be signed in absence. By signing the Agreement, the Parties once again declare their readiness to join forces and in partnership to work towards the implementation of Criteria for Assessing Content that is disadvantageous or creates a risk of impairment of the physical, mental, moral and/or social development of children, adopted in 2011 and amended in 2017 to protect the children's audience, and the rights and interests of children.

➤ In view of the spread and the danger of COVID-19, the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) has created an **online service which is a new opportunity for all - children and adults, who need to ask or share their emotions and anxieties.** The created section of the Agency's website is another opportunity for anyone who is looking for an answer to an important question, related to an unknown and new situation. The online service is supported by psychologists, whose aim is to help people feel more relaxed while abiding the imposed restrictions to stay at home and to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

Feedback Form has been developed on the Agency's website and anyone can use it to submit their email and describe in the text box the issue that is of concern. The person receives a response from a consultant, a professional in crisis situations, on their email. Some of the questions asked are posted on the site for the benefit of others, while maintaining the anonymity of everyone.

The practice of alerting, when a child is at risk for his or her health or life, to the local Child Protection Departments, police authorities and others, continues. The SACP can provide psychological support through a conference call, as well as in case of urgent need to send a

team on site, while taking the appropriate precautionary measures in the state of an emergency.

➤ In connection with the state of emergency in Bulgaria, in March 2020 the Chairperson of the SACP **addressed all mayors of municipalities in Bulgaria, as child protection bodies, with an appeal for increased commitment to all children**, including those who are placed in residential care. The chairperson stressed the need for increased commitment in compliance with World Health Organization measures for high personal hygiene and disinfection of facilities in social services for children, managed by municipalities.

In a letter, addressed to all 28 districts in the country, the chairperson of the SACP emphasized the concern for the health and well-being of all Bulgarian children, who are currently undergoing social exclusion because of the coronavirus. And while for adults, the motivation for adhering to and implementing the measures imposed by the National Crisis Staff in Bulgaria is high, for children this becomes even more challenging with each passing day.

The social isolation for children at the moment can be a cause for increased emotionality, depression and anxiety. In their interest, the SACP offered specific channels of assistance through counselling and psychological support. The Agency provided materials to health and safety councils, proposals for active and fun leisure activities, as well as opportunities to seek information and support when needed, to all mayors of municipalities. It has also been proposed to disseminate guidance to residential childcare services, where the children are more vulnerable.

➤ In April 2020, the SACP **updated the control measures for the observance of the rights of the child and started to conduct remote online checks**. This affects inspections at all schools, kindergartens and crèches, personal development support centers, healthcare facilities, Social Assistance Directorates and all child welfare providers. The new method of verification is done through the exchange of documents in the secure electronic service system, as well as the transfer of materials through encrypted files.

The Agency has also created conditions for video conferencing, depending on the capabilities of those being interviewed. On the basis of the results of remote online checks, instructions can be issued, in the case of an established violation, with a specified deadline for implementation, as well as methodological instructions and/or recommendations. Other competent authorities will be notified of their summaries.

This manner of work by the SACP is required by the recommendations of the National Operational Headquarters against the proliferation and danger of COVID-19. It will also be used in the future in case of an emergency situation. The first online inspection was made in the Social Assistance Directorate at the discretion of the District Prosecutor's Office related to a case of a child, being removed and placed in a foster family.

➤ In support of the children, SACP posted on its Facebook page **a message from a member of the Children's Council**, which seeks to inspire the faith and courage of children and their parents, to motivate them to strictly abide by the rules to limit the spread of the virus, as well as to support each other emotionally and to be hopeful, that we will handle this challenge, when we are united and we follow the rules.

➤ The SACP has **made an appeal to parents, who have had a separation and parental rights dispute or are in conflict**, in the context of regulated child-parent contacts, posted on the Agency's website, urging them to be patient so as not to exert pressure, and actively to communicate with their children using different forms for contact: Skype, phone, Viber, Messenger and others.

➤ To date, the SACP is actively involved in the process of **making and summarizing proposals from employees** for new, innovative and responsive proposals to support the children and their parents, for launching initiatives and activities to support even more Bulgarian citizens.

➤ UNICEF Bulgaria **has translated and promoted information material** from WHO, UNICEF and other international organizations targeting parents, professionals working with children and carers, as well as children and young people in difficult situations.

➤ **The Steps Together program** of UNICEF Bulgaria and the Ministry of Education and Science envisages the development and implementation of a comprehensive school program for a safe school environment and prevention of bullying and violence in the next three years, with the active participation of schools, building on good practices and existing experience in the country. The purpose of the program is to respond to the real needs and context of the different settlements, in which it will be piloted and implemented, as well as to ensure its sustainability and subsequent implementation throughout the country.

In addition to experience from other countries, practices that have been/or already exist in Bulgarian schools will be taken into account. Students will be equal participants in the process of change - the phenomenon of school violence affects children most directly. Therefore, they know best what the problem is, and what its potential solutions may be. It is envisaged that parents will be involved - it is crucial for parents to partner with their child, and with the entire school community in the school life, not just when a problem arises and is resolved. This helps to be created a culture of belonging and trust for all participants in the educational process.

➤ **Parents' Tips** - How to Talk to Your Kids about COVID-19, as well as Key Messages and Measures Against COVID-19 can be found on the UNICEF website.

➤ **NGOs provide free online services to citizens.** Teams provide psychological support; crisis intervention for needy children and adults, as well as mediation for liaison with other services and support.

➤ In connection with the possible increase in domestic violence cases from April 2020, it is possible to **report domestic violence via smartphone** at Pomogni.net. A button is placed in the application, which is activated when needed. After that information is automatically sent to Number 112 and the Animus Association Foundation, including the victim's location, names, and cell phone.

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Responses to specific questions by the Bureau of the Lanzarote Committee on the impact of the Covid-19 pandemic on the protection of children from sexual exploitation and sexual abuse

1. To what extent, if at all, has the threat of child sexual abuse/exploitation changed due to COVID-19? If so:
 - Please tell us about whether the level of risk has increased/decreased/remained the same and if possible specify this with regard to the various types of sexual offences against children (Articles 18-23 of the Convention);
 - You may also wish to indicate any emerging trends relating to child sexual abuse/exploitation, as the result of COVID-19, and point at measures taken to address them.

➤ By a Decision of the National Assembly of 13.03.2020, a state of emergency was declared in the Republic of Bulgaria to limit the spread of COVID-19. According to the Central Police Statistics, during the state of emergency, for the period **from 13.03.2020 to 13.05.2020** a total of 11 692 crimes were registered in the country, **or by 21, 76% less** compared to the same period of 2019.

From crimes committed under Art. 149-150 Penal Code (fornication) for the period from 13.03.2020 to 13.05.2020 17 minors were involved. For the same period in 2019, 30 children were involved.

From crimes, committed under Art. 152 of the Penal Code (rape, completed), during the state of emergency in 2020, 3 minors were involved. For the same period in 2019, 5 children were involved.

From crimes, committed under Art. 152 of the Penal Code (attempted rape) during the state of emergency in 2020 there were no underage victims, as in 2019.

The victims of minors and juveniles from various crimes, committed **in the conditions of domestic violence** for the period from 13.03.2020 to 13.05.2020, are 18. For the same period of 2019 the victims are 12.

About a month after the declaration of the state of emergency, the legislator provided that the procedural deadlines do not cease to run in cases under the Domestic Violence

Protection Act only regarding an order for immediate protection or amendment thereof, as well as in cases of rejection of the application for protection.

- ❖ As can be seen from the above data, it can be concluded that in the conditions of emergency from 13.03.2020 to 13.05.2020 the level of risk in relation to crimes, **committed in the conditions of domestic violence against minors is slightly increased, and for different types of sexual crimes against children there is a significant decrease.**

➤ The existing **National Telephone Hot Line for Children 116-111** is available **24 hours every day** to all children and their families, to whom psychologists and experts listen, support, direct callers on all matters of concern to them, and in the meantime, at child risk data, contact immediately the authorities for the protection of the child, depending on the scope, for investigation and action and protection measures, with the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) monitoring the measures taken until the risk for the child is eliminated.

The consultations, related to violence of children for the period January – April 2020 are 266 (physical - 107, psychological - 46, neglect - 69, **sexual – 18** and other – 21). As presumptive perpetrators were mentioned mainly the parents, and in some cases – other children. As place of the violence – mainly in the family, and for some of the cases – on the street, relatives and other.

The total number of calls for May is 6564. The topic that continues to be leading among children seeking counseling is about love relationships and relationships - 600. Most often, children aged between 13 and 18 call the line. The data show that young people aged 16 were the most active and their number is 87 on issues related to love. They are followed by 15-year-olds - 84, 17-year-olds - 60, 14-year-olds - 51 and 13-year-olds with 22 calls for the period from 01 to 31 May 2020. It is noteworthy that this topic excites younger children between 10 and 12 years. The number of 18-year-olds who discussed the topic with the consultants is smaller - 31 calls.

The consultations, related to violence of children for May are 76. The consultations related to presumptive cases of sexual violence in May 2020 are as follows:

- physical, sexual and psychological violence - 2
- inclination to pornography - 1
- fornication - 2
- inclination to sexual activity - 1
- rape - 1
- cyber torment - 1

There were also two consultations regarding early child marriage.

➤ Through the **Coordination mechanism for interaction in the work of children, victims or at risk of violence and for interaction in crisis intervention**, a rapid response is achieved between the responsible institutions in case of a child at risk or victim of violence. The interdepartmental and multidisciplinary teams join forces in order to close each case/signal for a child victim or at risk of violence. In each "Child Protection" department to the Social Assistance directorates, the head of the department is available, and he/she appoints a

responsible social worker who checks the signal within 24 hours of its receipt. The leading social worker prepares an action plan in the case of child protection, or for the prevention of violence, which is discussed in a team meeting and each participant undertakes his/her commitments according to his/her competencies.

➤ Depending on the urgency of the cases, and given the declared emergency epidemic situation in the country, related to COVID-19, the planned activities can be discussed with the multidisciplinary team in an operational manner (by phone, Viber, conference call, etc.), with the respective officials. If necessary, the employees of Child Protection department may submit a request to the structures of the Ministry of Interior, for granting "police protection" to the child. Parents for whom there is evidence that they involve the child in activities that adversely affect the child development, or their actions or inactions put the child at risk, are brought to justice and the court and the Prosecutor's Office are notified to take action within their competence.

➤ The problems caused by the crisis related to the spread of COVID-19, along with health risks, **can pose a serious risk of various forms of violence**. It should be noted that each case of a child is individual, and measures are taken to protect the rights and interests of the child. In the actions of social workers, the protection of the health, life and safety of the child is of paramount importance.

➤ In view of the anti-epidemic measures taken in the Republic of Bulgaria, in accordance with the recommendations given by the National Operational Headquarters to the Council of Ministers, the Executive Director of the Social Assistance Agency has instructed the directors of the Regional Directorates for Social Assistance and the mayors of municipalities, which to inform the social services directors on optimizing work processes in an emergency situation. In the conditions of the declared state of emergency in the country, the cooperation with the non-governmental organizations with proven experience in the work with persons and children, victims of violence, is also important.

2. Did lockdown cause child sexual abuse/exploitation cases (identified/reported) to increase, decrease or stay the same? Please submit data (number of victims/offenders) and highlight what you think may explain the trend.

➤ Data on reports and cases of violence against children, administered at the Social Assistance Agency (Table 1).

	Received signals of violence	Opened cases of violence	Number of signals of violence, for which a Coordination Mechanism has been implemented
2019	1,171	446	1,181
01.01.2020-30.04.2020	369	126	296

➤ The development of a network of social services for children in the community is an essential part of the process of change, related to the philosophy of child and family care. In the **prevention of violence, as well as in cases of violence against children**, the counseling services on the territory of the country carry out complex and purposeful activities, including psychological counseling. Community Support Centers (CPCs) are among the services that implement programs for the prevention of violence against children, and in the event of violence against a child. At the moment, 143 CPCs function as a state delegated activity on the territory of the country, and the number of users is 6 643. In case of established cases of violence against children, accommodation is provided in the social service of resident type - Crisis Center (CC). As of May 1, 2020, there are 19 CCs with a capacity of 196 seats.

➤ The Social Assistance Agency administers **data on the observed cases of child victims of trafficking** (including children victims of sexual exploitation), according to the Coordination Mechanism for Referral and Care of Unaccompanied Children and Child Victims of Trafficking Returning from abroad. Cases of child victims of trafficking are actively monitored by the Child Protection Department for a period of one year. At the discretion of the social worker, the monitoring period may be extended, depending on the specifics of the case.

In 2019 and the first quarter of 2020, the following information is available for the child victims of trafficking in the Social Assistance Agency, which are observed:

- first quarter of 2019 - 14 children were observed;
- second quarter of 2019 - 15 children were observed;
- third quarter of 2019 - 13 children were observed;
- fourth quarter of 2019 - 13 children were observed;
- first quarter of 2020 - 11 children were observed.

3. Please also tell us whether and how general child safeguarding measures were, or are likely to be, affected by measures taken by governments in response to COVID-19. In addition, highlight any additional, specific measures put in place during lockdown to ensure reporting by victims of child sexual abuse/exploitation as well as to support and assist them, and whether these measures will be maintained even when the lockdown is lifted.

➤ The SACP has developed the "Child" section of the **Unified Information Portal COVID-19** of the Council of Ministers, with useful information materials for children and parents.

➤ The SACP undertook actions to develop a **methodological and practical guide with instructions for actions in a crisis situation**, aimed at the institutions of the Coordination Mechanism in support of children and families.

➤ In view of the spread and the danger of COVID-19, the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) has created an **online service which is a new opportunity for all - children and adults, who need to ask or share their emotions and anxieties**. The created section of the Agency's website is another opportunity for anyone who is looking for an answer to an important question, related to an unknown and new situation. The online service is supported

by psychologists, whose aim is to help people feel more relaxed while abiding the imposed restrictions to stay at home and to protect themselves from the coronavirus.

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➤ In connection with the state of emergency in Bulgaria, in March 2020 the Chairperson of the SACP **addressed all mayors of municipalities in Bulgaria, as child protection bodies, with an appeal for increased commitment to all children**, including those who are placed in residential care.

➤ In a letter, addressed to all 28 districts in the country, the chairperson of the SACP emphasized **the concern for the health and well-being of all Bulgarian children**, who are currently undergoing social exclusion because of the coronavirus.

➤ In April 2020, the SACP **updated the control measures for the observance of the rights of the child and started to conduct remote online checks**. This affects inspections at all schools, kindergartens and crèches, personal development support centers, healthcare facilities, Social Assistance Directorates and all child welfare providers. The new method of verification is done through the exchange of documents in the secure electronic service system, as well as the transfer of materials through encrypted files.

➤ The SACP addressed the executive directors of the Social Assistance Agency and the National Association of Municipalities in the Republic of Bulgaria with a proposal, after the end of the state of emergency and normalization of business operations, to use the resources of the Social Assistance Directorates and mayors, in whose scope are the resident services, and to organize and hold periodic meetings with local businesses, with the active role of mayors, where during the meetings with the employers, the director of the Social Assistance Directorate or an official authorized by him to present the needs, opportunities, degree of education and qualification of young men and women, without support from parents or relatives, raised in a residential service, who are about to reach the age of majority and leave the service, in compliance with the provisions of Article 11a of the Child Protection Act, in order **to find a suitable workplace** in compliance with the Bulgarian legislation.

➤ In May 2020, the SACP prepared a **Handbook with rules and useful tips for safe surfing of children on the Internet**. The guide contains important tips for the child's health, as well as a glossary with useful information and additional tips - on uploading and sharing photos, tips on how to recognize fake news, information on what is online and cyberbullying. It also

includes useful contacts: DGCOC - Cybercrime Department, Center for Safe Internet, and National Telephone Line for Children 116 111 at the SACP.

➤ In view of the **difficulties, caused by social isolation and distance** related to finding adequate solutions for maintaining the connection of children and young people with their parents, relatives, close friends and classmates, to ensure access to distance learning, the team of the SACP developed a survey that sent to a total of 316 social services for children of residential type and specialized institutions.

➤ **A Guide is being prepared by SACP to help future parents** - rights and obligations under the law.

➤ In support of the children, SACP posted on its Facebook page **a message from a member of the Children's Council**, which seeks to inspire the faith and courage of children and their parents, to motivate them to strictly abide by the rules to limit the spread of the virus, as well as to support each other emotionally and to be hopeful, that we will handle this challenge, when we are united and we follow the rules.

➤ **UNICEF-Bulgaria** works in many ways to support the government, municipalities, NGOs, business and the media to ensure better outcomes for children, especially the most vulnerable.

➤ An **information hub** has been set up on the UNICEF website to provide advice and support to parents and other carers on a daily basis. UNICEF publishes up-to-date and accurate information and fights myths and misinformation. In close coordination with the WHO, it disseminates key public health messages and prevention advice, aimed at slowing the spread of the virus.

➤ The **U-Report youth platform** is launched. In this way, the Bulgarian youth can join 10 million users worldwide. The immediate goal is to raise the awareness of young people and to receive support through appropriate services for psycho-emotional, health, educational and social support. U-Report will continue its role as a platform for exchange of views, active participation and support even after the current crisis. UNICEF supports the active participation of young people and empowers them to share information, share experiences and help their peers in the current state of emergency. By supporting the creation of deposits by popular young influencers, the recording of podcasts by young journalists, the creation of webinars and challenges by youth NGOs, young people become partners and leaders in the overall response to COVID-19.

➤ The **“Health for Refugee and Migrant Children” project** will help to improve the health of refugee and migrant children by improving their access to life-saving immunizations, mental health and psychosocial support, prevention and response to gender-based violence, and health care, advices for mothers and newborns on breastfeeding and nutrition. Medical translators and cultural mediators will be involved to facilitate communication between children and families and health care providers. The project will also support training programs so that front-line staff can better respond to the specific needs of refugee and migrant children and their families.

➤ **The Steps Together program** of UNICEF Bulgaria and the Ministry of Education and Science envisages the development and implementation of a comprehensive school program for a safe school environment and prevention of bullying and violence in the next three years, with the active participation of schools, building on good practices and existing experience in the country. The purpose of the program is to respond to the real needs and context of the different settlements, in which it will be piloted and implemented, as well as to ensure its sustainability and subsequent implementation throughout the country.

➤ **NGOs provided free online services to citizens.** Teams provide psychological support; crisis intervention for needy children and adults, as well as mediation for liaison with other services and support.

➤ In connection with the possible increase in domestic violence cases from April 2020, it is possible to **report domestic violence via smartphone** at Pomogni.net. A button is placed in the application, which is activated when needed. After that information is automatically sent to Number 112 and Bulgarian Foundation, including the victim's location, names, and cellphone.

- 4. Finally, please tell us whether children have been duly listened to on decision-making concerning their protection against sexual abuse/exploitation during this period. Please also tell us whether and how children will be involved in decision-making on or assessing the impact of COVID-19 measures in the future.**

No information received.