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Reintegration and Social Inclusion of Child Victims of Trafficking in Bulgaria

Claire Healy

Executive Summary

Having suffered a severe violation of their rights, trafficked children have very specific needs when it comes to reintegration. The context of the reintegration of trafficked children in Bulgaria is characterised by the specific profiles of the children, the vast majority of whom are Bulgarian citizens. As well as children who have been trafficked, another group requiring reintegration services are children whose parents (usually mothers) have been trafficked. Some of the trafficked children and children whose parents have been trafficked are returned to Bulgaria from abroad, while others were trafficked internally within Bulgaria. Reintegration services for children are provided either at residential crisis centres or outside of centres if a child is not accommodated at a centre, and after a child has left the centre.

This Policy Brief sets out the context and key recommendations on the social inclusion and reintegration of trafficked children in Bulgaria. The various aspects of social inclusion and reintegration for trafficked children that are covered in this Brief, and which are the key outcomes of reintegration, are:

- general coordination of reintegration services;
- safe and affordable accommodation;
- legal status, legal issues and court proceedings;
- physical and psychological well-being;
- education and professional/vocational training;
- support for victims' family and community members;
- case monitoring and follow-up.

The Policy Brief presents some key policy recommendations in these areas, based on the current context of the reintegration and social inclusion of trafficked children in Bulgaria. It draws particularly on the (unpublished) "Assessment of the Long-Term Reintegration Services and Assistance Currently Provided to Child and Adult Victims of Trafficking in Bulgaria" conducted during 2017 by Dr. Radostina Pavlova for ICMPD (Pavlova, 2018). The assessment was preceded by desk research on "International Benchmarks for Monitoring and Management of THB Cases during the Post-shelter Period" (ICMPD, 2017), which indicated the areas of reintegration to examine and listed successful practices in several countries, and the "Assessment of the Implementation of the National Mechanism for Referral and Support of Trafficked Persons in Bulgaria" (ICMPD, 2018). As well as these three documents, the Brief draws on other relevant regional and international sources (a full set of References is included at the end of this Policy Brief).

Most trafficked children protected in Bulgaria are Bulgarian citizens

Introduction

The international definition of child trafficking differs from the definition of trafficking of adults. Child trafficking is: “*the recruitment, transportation, transfer, harbouring or receipt*” of children (anyone under the age of 18 years) for the purpose of exploitation. In the case of adults, certain means must also be used – “*the threat or use of force or other forms of coercion, of abduction, of fraud, of deception, of the abuse of power or of a position of vulnerability or of the giving or receiving of payments or benefits to achieve the consent of a person having control over another person*” – 2000 UN Trafficking Protocol, Article 3.

The means are not relevant in child trafficking cases because the fact of a child’s young age is considered to make them especially vulnerable, a fact that also means that a child has specific needs in the context of recovering from a trafficking experience.

These needs are recognised as rights in international and national child protection and anti-trafficking laws. As a general principle, all actions concerning a child should give primary consideration to the “best interests” of that particular child and to their practical access to child rights, as per the 1989 UN Convention on the Rights of the Child and the 2003 Child Protection Act (CPA) of the Republic of Bulgaria. The CPA determines that the Bulgarian State:

“shall protect and guarantee basic children’s rights in all spheres of public life for all groups of children in view of their age, social status, physical, health and mental development, as well as providing the appropriate economic, social and cultural environment, education, freedom of expression and security” (Art. 1.2).

In the context of recovery from a trafficking situation, children who have been trafficked, as well as children whose parent or primary caregiver has been trafficked, are at particular risk of not being able to effectively access their child rights. As an Issue Paper on Working with Trafficked Children and Youth in the Balkans set out:

“Children, by virtue of their age and maturity, may not have developed the tools and skills needed to cope with and overcome exploitation and abuse suffered while trafficked. Moreover, they often lack the resources, such as education, professional skills or finances, to build a healthy and positive life after trafficking. As a consequence, re/integration support and services are of particular importance in the case of trafficked children and youth to provide the skills, resources and confidence to recover and re/integrate into their families and society” (Surtees, 2014: 11).

Various aspects must be taken into account in making decisions related to a trafficked child, including consent by children’s parent or guardian, provided that the decision is in the best interests of the child and the child has also been consulted, in accordance with their age and maturity. In addition, every effort should be made to involve children in the monitoring of their own reintegration process. The child’s participation in decisions concerning them can only be effectively ensured by taking into account power relations between adults and children, and among children, acknowledging the competences of each child and the role they play in their families and communities, as well as the limitations of what any service provider can offer to each child (ICMPD, 2017).

Importance and Challenges of Reintegration and Social Inclusion of Trafficked Children

Reintegration support and services must be tailored to the child’s age, maturity, level of development, level of education, family situation and the specificities of their

Trafficked children have special needs and specific rights

The “best interests of the child” principle guides the reintegration process

trafficking experience. There are significant challenges inherent in the process that need to be taken into account, particularly the difficulty of determining what the best interests of each child are, and balancing their access to different child rights. Depending on the case, this may also include decisions on custody, if parents or caregivers were involved in the exploitation. In addition, these rights need to be provided in a context where the State also has the obligation to prosecute offenders, and where service providers may have limited human, financial and material resources.

Reintegration is one of the most important and complex aspects of the anti-trafficking response, and it is of crucial importance in relation to trafficked children. This social and economic process should allow children to live in a safe environment, enjoy a decent standard of living and of mental and physical health, and have access to their child rights, including education. This can be realised in the child's locality or country of origin or former residence, or in a different location, depending on what is best for the child (King Baudouin Foundation, 2015).

For trafficked children, as for adults, *“careful attention is needed as to how to constructively and effectively support and enhance their empowerment and resilience”* (Surtees, 2014: 12). One central element of building resilience is to ensure that there is no risk for the child of being re-trafficked.

This Policy Brief focuses specifically on the reintegration of children, while an accompanying Policy Brief examines reintegration of trafficked people in general and looks at services for adults. This Policy Brief is based largely on research conducted in the framework of the project Swiss-Bulgarian cooperation in identification and long-term assistance of children and adult victims of trafficking in human beings, funded by the Swiss-Bulgarian Cooperation Programme and implemented by Bulgarian National Commission for Combating Trafficking in Human Beings (NCCTHB) in partnership with ICMPD.

Reintegration is crucial for trafficked children

The project *“Swiss-Bulgarian cooperation in identification and long-term assistance of children and adult victims of trafficking in human beings”* is one of the three components of the Swiss-Bulgarian Programme of Cooperation for the Prevention of Trafficking in Human Beings (THB) and the Identification, Protection, Support, Return & Reintegration of Victims. It aims to improve the bilateral cooperation between Switzerland and Bulgaria in the fight against human trafficking and improving the implementation of the Bulgarian National Referral Mechanism (NRM) for victims of human trafficking.

The objectives of the project are to contribute to:

- 1) improved identification of victims of THB in Switzerland;
- 2) increased number of child and adult THB victims who are assisted in shelters and crisis centres; and
- 3) improved policies and monitoring mechanisms for the post-shelter period of child and adult THB victims.

The policy recommendations in this document relate to the third objective: **improving policies and monitoring mechanisms for trafficking victims in the post-shelter period.**

Current Context

Child trafficking trends in Bulgaria

Across the EU in recent years, Bulgarians have been among the largest groups of both identified trafficking victims and perpetrators, along with Romanians, Hungarians and Slovaks (Europol, 2016). The vast majority of children who are assisted in Bulgaria in the context of trafficking reintegration are either Bulgarian girls and boys who have been trafficked for sexual exploitation, forced begging, forced

criminal activities, forced marriage, labour exploitation or sale of babies in Bulgaria or abroad, or children whose parents or caregivers have been trafficked in Bulgaria or abroad.

The State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) was informed about and worked on 28 cases of child trafficking (18 girls and 10 boys) in 2016, most of whom were Bulgarian, but two of whom were Afghani boys who were intercepted at Sofia airport, when a relative attempted to take them abroad for exploitation. The most commonly identified forms of exploitation among children according to the SACP were sexual exploitation (8 – all girls); forced begging¹ (4 boys and 3 girls); forced criminal activity (4 girls and 2 boys); forced/servile marriage (2 girls) and labour exploitation (1 girl) (Pavlova, 2017).

These trafficked children had mostly been returned to Bulgaria from other EU Member States: Italy (3), Sweden (3), Spain (3), Germany (2), Greece (2), Austria (2), UK (2), Netherlands (1), Poland (1), Denmark (1), France (1), Slovakia (1), Hungary (1); or other European countries: Switzerland (1), Bosnia and Herzegovina (1). Three Bulgarian children had been internally trafficked for labour exploitation and forced criminal activity. In the same year, for prevention purposes, 17 children were banned from leaving the country (see below), and provided with support to prevent trafficking (Pavlova, 2017). Overall, there has been a significant decrease in the number of trafficked children identified during the last 2-3 years.

Relevant Bulgarian legal framework

In 2003, Bulgaria adopted the Combating of Trafficking in Human Beings Act (CTHBA), which sets out the rights of trafficked people in Bulgaria, including their access to reintegration services.

The primary piece of legislation governing the protection of all children in Bulgaria is the Child Protection Act (CPA). The CPA regulates:

“the rights, principles and measures for the protection of the child, the state and municipal bodies and their interaction in carrying out the activities for the protection of the child as well as the participation of legal and physical persons in such activities” (Art. 1, CPA).

The CPA designates the State Agency for Child Protection (SACP) and the Social Protection Directorates as the state bodies responsible for protection of children, as well as relevant Ministers (education, health, social policy, etc.) and mayors (Art. 6).

The other relevant legislation includes the Family Code (on parental custody issues), the Labour Code (on the minimum age for access to employment), the Bulgarian Constitution (on rights to education) and the Pre-School and School Education Act. In addition, since 2006, as a protection measure under the Identification Documents Law, children who have been:

“involved in or exploited for begging, prostitution, sexual violence, dissemination of pornographic materials or obtaining an unlawful income are banned from leaving the country, are not issued passports or substituting documents, while those already issued are confiscated.” (NCCTHB Response to GRETA, 23.05.2017). This is a special measure to protect Bulgarian children and their best interests and to prevent re-trafficking. The SACP requests the Minister of Interior to issue an administrative order under the Identification Documents Law (Art. 76a), to prohibit a child from leaving the country for a period of two years (ICMPD, 2018).

¹ On forced begging, see Healy & Rogoz (2012), which includes case studies on Sofia and Varna.

Procedures for identification, referral, protection and reintegration of trafficked children

In the case of trafficked children, the SACP has the overall responsibility, in compliance with the CPA and as per the National Referral Mechanism for Victims of Trafficking (NRM). Children are included as a group with special needs in the NRM and specific referral steps are described (ICMPD, 2018). The main responsibility for protection and reintegration of trafficked children lies with the SACP and its Child Protection Units and the Ministry of Interior, as well as the Social Protection Directorates and the International Organization for Migration (IOM) in the context of return and reintegration.

There is a separate Coordination Mechanism for the Referral and Support of Unaccompanied Children and Child Victims of Trafficking Returning from Abroad.² It was adopted in 2005 and aims to coordinate the work of the relevant authorities in carrying out their mandates in relation to cases of unaccompanied children, including victims of trafficking, both Bulgarian children exploited abroad and children of foreign citizens identified on the territory of Bulgaria (ICMPD, 2018). Apart from stage one, this mechanism also applies to cases of internal trafficking. The Mechanism covers the following stages:

1. Receiving a report from abroad of a Bulgarian child victim of trafficking;
2. Receiving the child in Bulgaria and taking the appropriate immediate measures, such as placement in a crisis centre (shelter);
3. Providing protection measures at the local level, while the child is in the centre;
4. Following the case for one year, in order to prevent re-trafficking.

The mechanism also provides guidance on the role of the competent institutions in each of these stages.

For the fourth stage, which covers the child's reintegration, the SACP ensures coordination and cooperation between the institutions and organisations and/or municipalities that are reintegration service providers, particularly the Child Protection Units. The Social Assistance Agency (SAA) carries out monitoring of unaccompanied children and trafficked children. Finally, the Social Protection Directorate follows the case for the period of one year, to prevent re-trafficking or the child being taken abroad. The Social Protection Directorate also provides feedback to the crisis centre, the SAA and the SACP.

All governmental and non-governmental anti-trafficking actors in Bulgaria can make a preliminary identification of trafficked children. The SACP collects all the information on the cases, and provides information to and requests it from the other child protection institutions – the Social Protection Directorate within the SAA, the Child Protection Units across the country and local police stations. This ensures the centralised collection of data on trafficked children at national level (ICMPD, 2018).

While the SACP plays the lead coordination role, the NCCTHB and Local Commissions to Combat Trafficking in Human Beings (LCCTHB) remain informed, but do not have a major role to play in the reintegration process. An interviewee from the SACP described the process of a trafficked child being returned from abroad as follows:

² Available at: www.veliko-tarnovo.bg/media/filer/2014/12/17/koordinacionen-mehanizam.pdf [in Bulgarian]. Note: this mechanism is not available on the SACP website, nor was there any official source confirming its adoption and implementation. However, several interviewees for the Assessment, including the NCCTHB representative, referred to it and considered it to be the operating procedure when a victim of human trafficking is a child (Pavlova, 2017).

“The process starts with the Border Police and the Organised Crime Unit of the Ministry of the Interior meeting with the child upon arrival; the child is usually scared at this moment, it is difficult for him/her to talk; there is uncertainty about what will happen at the crisis centre, and whether the family will be involved. The child is then referred to the SACP. At that point the child has already been identified (abroad) – so the SACP does not deal with identification issues” (cited in Pavlova, 2017).

However, in the assessment that was conducted, just one of the local interviewees was aware of the Coordination Mechanism and had participated in meetings with the prosecutor, police, educational advisor and NGOs. Little evidence was found that long-term monitoring is conducted on victims who do not use any of the services. IOM in Bulgaria monitors the financial support given by them to the trafficking victims for long-term support purposes. According to the official regulations, the Child Protection units and Social Assistance Directorates also provide monitoring of the long-term integration of the child trafficking cases (Pavlova, 2017).

In cases of internal trafficking of children and trafficked children returned from abroad, the police unit informs the responsible Child Protection Unit and the victim is placed in temporary accommodation for children or at a crisis centre, and then the prosecutor’s office and the parents are informed. If an adult victim of trafficking has children but they are not with her/him, then the social services will attempt to locate the children and reunite them with their mother/father, or make sure they are safe from the traffickers. In other cases, children stay with their parents at crisis centres (Pavlova, 2017).

According to the NCCTHB’s response to the 2016 GRETA Recommendation, the SACP set up an inter-institutional working group specifically to coordinate and improve cooperation on working with foreign children among institutions and organisations in Bulgaria (23.05.2017).

Good practices, gaps and challenges, Recommendations

General

In addition to the general recommendations set out in the accompanying Policy Brief on the reintegration of trafficking victims in general, many of which also apply to children, some recommendations specific to children are presented here. In particular, while referral mechanisms for trafficked people are considered to work relatively well for adults, this is not the case for children (Pavlova, 2017).

Coordination between the SACP and the NCCTHB is generally considered to function well and the measures of the two coordination mechanisms are well aligned. However, several weak points were identified through the NRM Assessment (ICMPD, 2018), including the need for better monitoring of the Coordination Mechanism for Children and the Coordination Mechanism for Interaction in Cases of Child Victims of Violence (or Children at Risk of Becoming Victims of Violence). The SACP does not receive information regarding potential victims of child trafficking – for example, children who are sexually exploited in prostitution in Bulgaria and normally fall under the Law for Combating Anti-Social Behaviour of Minors (ICMPD, 2018).

There is also a need for better international cooperation on cases of children on the move. The Ministry of Justice recommended that EC Regulation 2201/2003 concerning jurisdiction and the recognition and enforcement of judgments in matrimonial matters and matters of parental responsibility be used as a tool for the protection of children on the move (ICMPD, 2018).

In addition, many anti-trafficking stakeholders perceive their role in providing protection as secondary, because, by law and according to the NRM, the SACP has

overall responsibility for all children in Bulgaria, with the local Child Protection Units of the SAA implementing the protection measures. Another key issue is that the staff of the SACP are often overworked and overwhelmed, and some of them do not have adequate training to work with trafficked children (Pavlova, 2017).

The Coordination Mechanism for the Referral and Care of Cases of Unaccompanied Children and Child Victims of Trafficking Returning from Abroad is less well known than the general NRM and is not as easily available as a document (neither in print, nor electronically on the official SACP site) and not as well implemented. Specifically for foreign children, there is a lack of clarity on procedures in cases involving non-Bulgarian children and slow reactions by institutions (Pavlova, 2017).

- **Recommendation:** Apply the good practices from implementing the NRM (e.g., multi-disciplinary teams) to improve the implementation of the Coordination Mechanism for the Referral and Care of Cases of Unaccompanied Children and Child Victims of Trafficking Returning from Abroad.
- **Recommendation:** Relevant stakeholders have received some training on the reintegration of trafficked children, but more is needed, particularly in order to increase their familiarity with the Coordination Mechanism for Children. This applies to a broad range of institutions and NGOs working with trafficked children.
- **Recommendation:** Ensure that SACP and Child Protection Unit staff are adequately qualified and trained, and that there are sufficient numbers of staff, to work with trafficked children. SACP staff and the staff of the Child Protection Units should also regularly coordinate and meet to discuss cases.

Accommodation

While the provision of emergency accommodation for trafficked children is more of an immediate protection measure, it is also an essential first step in their reintegration process. The respective regional directorate of the Social Assistance Agency (SAA) arranges for temporary accommodation for trafficked children immediately and refers them to a shelter in order for them “*to move to a secure environment and receive basic services – provision of shelter and food, healthcare and psychological assistance, development of life and social skills, education, preparation of the child for reintegration into the family, and if it is impossible, provision of other protection measures in accordance with the Child Protection Act*” (NCCTHB Response to GRETA, 23.05.2017).

In addition, some children may need to spend a longer period of time residing in specialised accommodation. According to data provided by the SAA, there are 18 crisis centres for children who are victims of violence, including trafficking, in Bulgaria, managed by NGOs and local municipalities. This is where most trafficked children are placed. Some crisis centres are only for children, while others offer services both for children and adults (NCCTHB Response to GRETA, 23.05.2017).

The NCCTHB opened a specialised crisis centre for children in Sofia in July 2017, at which two children had been placed so far at the time of the research. Before this, children were often placed at the general crisis centres, or accommodated in centres for women who are victims of violence, including trafficking (Pavlova, 2017).

According to the SACP, after a child is informally identified as a presumed victim of trafficking, she or he is placed in a protected space, or a crisis centre. This can be a family-type environment, but usually they are placed at a crisis centre because the centres are specialised in working with child victims of trafficking and have 24-hour security.

As of the beginning of 2017, just one crisis centre for children was functioning in Sofia – the "Faith, Hope and Love" Crisis Centre for child victims of violence and trafficking in human beings, with a capacity of 22 places. The crisis centre offers the possibility of 3-6 months of crisis accommodation for trafficked children, with the option of extending this period by prosecutor's order when this is necessary for the purposes of a criminal trial.

Prior to 2017, the capacity for accommodation of trafficked children in Sofia was insufficient to respond to the growing need for shelter and long-term care. In order to address this issue and build a comprehensive network of services for all victims of trafficking, including children, in July 2017, the NCCTHB established a new specialised service for trafficked children in Sofia – the Crisis Centre for Child Victims of Trafficking. There are a sufficient number of crisis centres for accommodating trafficked children, particularly with the opening of the dedicated NCCTHB centre in Sofia. This is particularly important for children who are not in the custody of their parents or primary caregiver, due to the latter's involvement in the trafficking or for other reasons.

However, proposals were submitted to the SACP by the managers of crisis centres in order to improve cooperation on protecting trafficked children. On the basis of these proposals, the SACP prepared Methodological Guidelines for the crisis centres and the Child Protection Units of the SAA's regional directorates on working with children who have been trafficked and exploited (NCCTHB Response to GRETA, 23.05.2017).

In addition, what is particularly relevant for children whose parent has been trafficked is that there is a lack of sufficient separate accommodation facilities for families, as most existing accommodation centres are only for adults or only for children. Another key issue is the need for support for young people who were trafficked as children and have since "aged out" (turned 18) and who need assistance for this transition phase into adulthood (Pavlova, 2017).

It is the task of the multidisciplinary team assigned to the case to decide whether the child needs additional psychological support and to recommend appropriate further services. The local Social Assistance Directorate Issues Referral/Indicative Document recommends accommodation and long-term support for a period of six months, with two extensions possible. The support can continue after the child leaves the crisis centre and is accommodated with his/her family or receiving another service (ICMPD, 2018).

Long-term support of child victims after they leave the crisis centre is also a gap that was identified. However, there are existing possibilities under the Social Protection Law, such as family accommodation centres, which would be faster and easier than setting up new services. It is important to make the service long enough in duration to respond to the child's needs, but not too long, because of the risk of institutionalisation. A good example are the family centres for accommodation³ (ICMPD, 2018).

- **Recommendation:** Provide a support package, including financial support, for child victims of trafficking when they turn 18.
- **Recommendation:** Use existing services to provide support for children after they leave the crisis centres.

³ Център за настаняване от семеен тип (ЦНСП).

Legal assistance

Under Art. 15 (8) of the CPA, every child has the right to legal aid and to an appeal in all proceedings concerning their rights and interests. This applies to children who are trafficked with respect to any administrative or judicial procedure that may be part of their reintegration. If a child participates in criminal proceedings, the methods used are child-specific and include conducting interrogations in a blue room in the presence of a psychologist, and minimising the number of interviews with the child. If the child's family is not able to make decisions for them, a guardian is appointed in accordance with the provisions of the Family Code. If the child is placed in a long-term care centre, the director of the centre may act as guardian.

Some of the key legal issues include the fact that begging and prostitution are considered offences against public order, and so sometimes children trafficked for forced begging or sexual exploitation may be seen as offenders, rather than victims. Also, most cases where a child receives compensation as a victim of trafficking are cases of Bulgarian children compensated abroad rather than in Bulgaria.

In addition, specifically in relation to guardianship, unaccompanied and separated migrant children are considered to be at risk of trafficking, though they are not identified as trafficking victims, partly because guardianship procedures are problematic. The appointment of a guardian is more difficult if the child is placed with a foster family, as foster parents are not allowed to be guardians. Often an unrelated adult travelling in a group with the child is assigned guardianship, or municipal employees, who are not always competent, and children often go missing from centres.

According to the NCCTHB's response to the 2016 GRETA Recommendation, legislative initiatives to expand the scope of situations when guardianship can be allocated, including when parents were involved in the trafficking, had not progressed (23.05.2018).

➤ **Recommendation:** Expand the guardianship possibilities for child victims of trafficking whose parents were involved in the trafficking, by amending the Family Code.

Medical and Psychological Assistance

Crisis centres for children offer specialised psychological care provided by psychologists and educational specialists. However, after a child leaves the crisis centre, there are no long-term programmes through which to continue this type of work. Access to medical care may be difficult if the child has no documents, such as a national ID card. As with adult victims of trafficking, support is provided to mothers with children to access medical care, through referrals and help with preparing the required documents. However, often the successful facilitation of access is based on personal contacts with hospitals and individual doctors.

➤ **Recommendation:** Access to medical care and psychological assistance for all trafficked children should be systematically provided by hospitals and doctors, within the state healthcare system.

Education and professional/vocational training

According to Article 53 of the Bulgarian Constitution, education up to the age of 16 is compulsory, and primary and secondary education at public schools is free. Access to education for children is further regulated through the Pre-School and School Education Act. Educational specialists working at crisis centres assist children in enrolling in school, catching up with schoolwork and doing homework. Shelter staff

sometimes provide basic literacy and education for the children, in cooperation with the educational specialist and with the regional directorates of the Ministry of Education. This prepares the children for exams and eventual reintegration into school, as well as staff accompanying them to and from school.

Educational institutions also provide support through school psychologists. In 2016, a new regulation for inclusive education was adopted. The regulation provides for the creation of teams of professionals within educational institutions to support children in need, including child victims trafficking. Prior to this, the practice had been that the Regional Educational Inspectorate, after an assessment of the child's educational level, assigned each child to a specific class. In order to have constant contact with the school authorities, children who have been in a situation of human trafficking are always enrolled in a regular form of schooling, as being out-of-school or dropping out after enrolment is a key risk factor. However, the Ministry of Education could only provide official information for three or four children who received integration into the school system during the period 2010-2016 (ICMPD, 2018).

One problem identified in relation to schooling is that some trafficked children may face intolerance and lack of understanding of their needs in the school environment, according, meaning that it is necessary to work with the school staff and with the other children at the schools to prevent this. In addition, trafficked children may have literacy problems and low levels of formal schooling. However, little work is done with the family by the school where the child is enrolled and the parents may also have literacy problems.

The Bulgarian Labour Code sets the minimum age at which somebody can be employed at 16 years of age, while allowing for some exceptions for children aged 14 to 16, in special circumstances and with the permission of the Labour Inspection Directorates. For children aged 16-17, the services provided to trafficked adults in the area of labour market integration also apply.

➤ **Recommendation:** Conduct sensitisation and awareness-raising campaigns among educators and schoolchildren.

Family mediation and counselling; Assistance to secondary beneficiaries

The family environment is considered a crucial determining factor for the successful reintegration of children and avoiding re-trafficking. This means that the most important secondary beneficiaries when the victim is a child are his or her parents and other family members. Social workers are responsible for examining the child's background, evaluating the parent's capacity and for referring the child and the family to the social services provided in the community. If the child cannot be placed with their parents, according to the Family Code, because their identity is not known, they are dead or they are deprived of custody, a guardian is appointed (Pavlova, 2017).

When it comes to child victims, information is gathered by the SACP and referred to the Child Protection Unit within the local Social Assistance Directorate (CPD-DSP) according to the child's registered address. Social workers conduct an assessment interview and research of the family background and the family support available to the child. They also visit the family in order to conduct the risk assessment. Before a child victim of THB leaves the crisis centre, the local Child Protection Unit prepares instructions for the parents regarding the health of and social support for the child, their education needs, etc. (ICMPD, 2018).

While the child is accommodated in a crisis centre, the local CPD-DSP assesses all the available resources, including their (extended) family. Often parental support and

facilitation of family relations is required. If the child is assessed to be at risk and there is a plan to reunite them with their family, it is mandatory for the parents to undergo an assessment of their parental capacities. These services are offered by the crisis centre personnel, the CPD-DSP social workers or psychologists, or by local child protection NGOs (ICMPD, 2018).

A detailed assessment of the capacity of the parents is carried out before a child can leave the crisis centre, and if the parents participated in the trafficking, the child is placed in a specialised institution or with a foster family until such a time as the circumstances have changed. If the parents were not involved, the child may be returned to them, but the respective unit of the SAA continues to work with the child for as long as needed, up to a maximum of two years.

The SACP has programmes in place to help support the parenting abilities of the parents of trafficked children, and to provide them with information on trafficking risks. Usually, while a child is at a crisis centre, their parents are required to come for meetings twice a month. In some cases, particularly when the child was placed in an institution against the parents' will, they may be resistant to these meetings. However, the SACP experts work with them collaboratively and not in a punitive manner to encourage cooperation over time. This work with the parents continues for as long as needed. If the parents lack the minimum required parental capacity for such work, another member of the extended family, such as a grandmother or an aunt, may be involved instead.

The Child Protection Units within the municipal administrations provide support measures for mothers who are victims of trafficking and in longer-term accommodation, so that they can care for their children.

There is a difficulty however with providing services to the entire family and keeping mothers and children together, and so children may be separated from their mother even if she is able and willing to care for them. Help with custody and parental capacity issues is an area of need that was identified.

- **Recommendation:** Provide specialised training to case workers at the child protection institutions on child trafficking and custody issues.
- **Recommendation:** Treat cases of child trafficking as a family issue, where possible, and work with the entire family over the long term in order to ensure successful reintegration of the trafficked child.

Regular case monitoring and follow-up

The monitoring of cases of child victims of THB as well as services for child victims of THB follows the same logic and steps as the monitoring of services for adults, but the guiding principle is always **the best interests of the child**. A similar set of professional principles should be adopted by all those who conduct monitoring on services for children and who are in direct contact with children. These necessary requirements are:

- Experience and knowledge on working with children;
- Training in child protection;
- Interviewing only with a partner (another adult);
- Exchange of information with child protection organisation(s);
- Regular screening for suitability for working with children;

- Awareness of the cultural/social context of the child;
- Awareness of the social and legal welfare systems (ICMPD, 2017).

For Bulgarian children who have been exploited abroad and then returned, when the child leaves a crisis centre, the SACP receives a “social report” drafted by the staff at the centre in which the progress of the child is recorded. The SACP also sends this report to the organisation or institution that supported the child in the country of exploitation. As soon as the child is with their family, a foster family or in a long-term institutional setting, the SACP receives another report, which is also sent to the country of exploitation. The child’s file is kept throughout by the Child Protection Unit in the respective municipality, and if the child is with a foster family, the assigned social worker is responsible for the monitoring of the case (Pavlova, 2017).

The SAA follows up cases for up to one and a half years and provides all collected information to the SACP, which has a monitoring function (ICMPD, 2018). At a local level, according to the procedure for long-term management of cases of trafficked women with children, the shelter contacts the Child Protection Unit and organises a meeting with the mother and the shelter staff, in order to draw up an individual plan for the steps to be followed. Progress on the plan is assessed every 3-6 months, and the plan is adjusted where necessary. The case is usually managed like this for 2-3 years (Pavlova, 2017).

➤ **Recommendation:** Mainstream the practice of forming multi-disciplinary teams around each case of child trafficking, with clear division and assignment of tasks and responsibilities, and organising regular face-to-face meetings.

The policy recommendations set out in this Policy Brief are to be used for future policy action, as well as in advocacy campaigns at the national and EU levels, particularly in connection with Bulgaria’s Presidency of the Council of the European Union in the first half of 2018, with the goal of effecting policy changes to improve the services and conditions for the long-term reintegration of child victims of trafficking in Bulgaria.

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Contact Information

For more information please contact Dr. Claire Healy, Research Officer, ICMPD.

Anti- Trafficking Programme
International Centre for Migration Policy Development (ICMPD)
Gonzagagasse 1, 5th floor
1010 Vienna, Austria
Tel: +43 1 504 46 77 2318
Fax: +43 1 504 46 77 2375
Email: Claire.Healy@icmpd.org