

CASE *study*: BULGARIA



Breaking Down Barriers to Quality

ECEC for Roma Children in Sofia

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This material is part of a compilation of various case studies from across Europe that show different facets of early childhood development, and the types of policies and interventions that we are promoting through the 'First Years, First Priority' campaign.

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first years
first priority

**A FAIR START
FOR *every* CHILD
IN EUROPE**

The Equal Opportunities Initiative Association (EOIA)¹ has been working with Roma communities in Sofia since 2008, helping to increase enrolment rates of young Roma children in pre-school. Today they collaborate closely with local authorities and national government, ensuring that Roma parents are consulted on issues of access and quality of early childhood services.²

To enrol in kindergarten or preschool, children in Bulgaria are required to have an electronic profile. Although intended to facilitate the enrolment process, the system creates additional barriers for parents who do not have access to computers, a viable internet connection, or who have low reading skills in Bulgarian. In addition, municipalities do not provide any technical aid to parents and families in need.

The Roma community is particularly disadvantaged. Many Roma families are unable to pay the monthly fees, and cannot access the electronic system for enrolment. Often they also lack the required official documents.

The **EOIA (Equal Opportunities Initiative Association)** works to facilitate access to education for the Roma community. They offer legal aid and education, and they create and maintain profiles in the national electronic registration system to enable children access kindergarten and compulsory pre-school education. Almost 5,000 profiles have been created since 2010. EOIA also provides shared resources including toys and books, as well as parenting classes on health and nutrition.

POSITIVE POLICY DEVELOPMENTS BUT ROMA ARE STILL DISADVANTAGED

Bulgaria has a 'split system' for children under 7 years old³. Children aged 0-3 are the responsibility of the Ministry of Health. Children aged 3-6/7 years old are the responsibility of the Ministry of Education and Science. Kindergarten buildings, their maintenance, health and safety, and children's transport and meals are the responsibility of regional and local authorities.

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) was introduced in the **National Programme for Schools and Early Childhood Education** (2006-2015) with the aim of '*creating the necessary conditions for children to be able to develop their potential and to ease their transition into school*'⁴. In August 2016, this program was replaced by the **Pre-School and School Education Act**⁵, which aimed to develop standards in ECEC and promote its role in positive social integration⁶.

Additionally, the **2004 Health Act** was revised in December 2019, and provides the framework for education and care of children under 3 years old.⁷

1 **Projects and Programs**. Equal Opportunities Initiative Association Website, Available in English

2 **About Us**. Equal Opportunities Initiative Association Website, Available in English

3 Schreyer, I. and P. Oberhuemer. 2017. "**Bulgaria – Key Contextual Data**". In *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer, p.2

4 *Ibid.*,

5 *Ibid.*,

6 **Pre-school and School Education Act** (Bulgaria). Promulgated, State Gazette No. 79/13.10.2015, effective 1.08.2016, Available in English

7 Schreyer, I. and P. Oberhuemer. 2017. "**Bulgaria – Key Contextual Data**". In *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer, p.2

With these changes, children from aged 2 can now enter kindergarten⁸, and education in pre-primary groups (ages 5-7) is now compulsory⁹. While kindergartens are not formally part of the school system, school readiness is assessed through a set of standardized learning outcomes¹⁰. A leaving certificate is issued to children, and is needed to enter primary school¹¹.

Despite these positive policy developments, Bulgaria still lags behind the rest of the EU in several areas linked to children's well-being. Bulgaria has the highest rates of poverty in the EU27: 31.6% of children are at risk of poverty or social exclusion¹².

Roma are estimated to represent around 10% of the Bulgarian population¹³ and Roma children much less likely to attend pre-school. In 2015/16 only 40% of Roma 3-6 year olds were enrolled in kindergarten¹⁴, compared to 81% among the population as a whole¹⁵.

One particular challenge of accessing kindergarten is the electronic enrolment system. It ranks students based on a 'points' system. Criteria include a registered address in the Sofia Municipality, parents enrolled in higher education in Sofia, an employed parent, and other factors including having siblings in the same kindergartens. For each of these criteria, official certificates from the local municipality must be provided.

Many Roma families are unable to pay the monthly fees (an average of 23 euros a month)¹⁶ and have difficulties accessing the electronic system for enrolment. In addition, mainstream schools have shown very little interest in working with bilingual Roma students. This creates barriers for Roma children, instead of promoting the positive integration intended through the Pre-School and School Education Act¹⁷.

TARGETED ACTIONS TO REACH OUT TO ROMA FAMILIES

Fakulteta, Hristo Botev, and Filipovtzi are neighbourhoods of Sofia with high Roma populations. In the three localities, there are segregated schools which provide ECEC services. The quality of these schools is poor, the unemployment rate is exceptionally high (up to 80% in some 'poverty pockets'), and health epidemics are common among children and the elderly due to limited health care access.

Despite investment in new facilities, renovations of existing ones, and efforts to accommodate all children, many parents struggle to find adequate and affordable kindergarten close to home.

8 *In Bulgaria, Kindergartens refer to ECEC services for 2/3-5 year old children and Pre-school/or pre-primary groups refer to ECEC services for 5-6/7 year old children.

9 Ibid.,

10 [Bulgaria: ECEC](#). Eurydice Network Website. Available in English

11 Ibid.,

12 Eurostat, [People at risk of poverty or social exclusion, latest data for 2018](#).

13 [Roma integration in Bulgaria](#): Funding, strategy, facts and figures and contact details for national Roma contact points in Bulgaria. European Commission Website

14 Schreyer, I. and P. Oberhuemer. 2017. "[Bulgaria – Key Contextual Data](#)". In *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer, p.5

15 World Bank. 2013. [SABER early childhood development country report : Bulgaria 2013](#). (English). Systems Approach for Better Education Results (SABER) country report ; 2013. Washington, DC : World Bank Group.

16 The fee varies in the different municipalities, as it is determined with an act of the respective municipal council.

17 Schreyer, I. and P. Oberhuemer. 2017. "[Bulgaria – Key Contextual Data](#)". In *Workforce Profiles in Systems of Early Childhood Education and Care in Europe*, edited by P. Oberhuemer and I. Schreyer, p.5

Since 2008, EOIA has implemented the programme 'Equal Access to Kindergartens for Roma Children in Sofia'. The main goal has been to increase the share of Roma children within the Sofia municipality successfully enrolled in ECEC. To achieve this goal, it set the following objectives:

1. Increase the enrolment and attendance rate of Roma children into pre-school
2. Provide a smooth transition between pre-school and mainstream primary education
3. Empower Roma parents to continue to enroll their children using the electronic system

To achieve these goals, EOIA carries out the following activities:

1. Organises public awareness campaigns on the importance of enrolling children in kindergarten/nursery from an early age
2. Maintains electronic profiles and informs parents of new information on a weekly basis, especially for those who do not have computers or internet
3. Assists parents in collecting and submitting all required documents, including employment contracts, birth certificates, and proof of address. In certain cases, EOIA assists families by covering the cost of medical check-up and vaccination bills.
4. Organises monthly talks for parents covering a variety of topics, including nutrition, healthy environments, and pregnancy. Incentives such as free diapers and infant formula are provided to encourage participation.
5. Runs the 'Toy Library' and 'Your Story' programmes. Toy Library is run by parents previously assisted by the programme. It offers toys and educational material appropriate for children under 7 years old. The 'Your Story' programme is a reading session designed to help parents improve their literacy practices at home, as well as develop parenting skills through discussions and enhancing a sense of community.

PARENTAL ENGAGEMENT AND COLLABORATION WITH THE AUTHORITIES ARE KEYS TO SUCCESS

The programme began with pilot funding from the Open Society Institute Sofia in 2008¹⁸. It was later supported by the America for Bulgaria Foundation (2010)¹⁹ and the Roma Education Fund (2010 to 2018)²⁰. In 2019 it received 12-month funding from the Centre for Educational Integration of Children from Ethnic Minorities of the Ministry on Education and Science²¹.

Community mediators are the first point of contact for families. They provide support and information. Many facilitators – including those responsible for the 'Toy Library' and 'Your Story' programme – have received pedagogical training.

The initiative has had a substantial impact on the local community. As from August 2020 EOIA established partnership with local community center, which now occupies the second floor of municipal building, provided rent free by the local administration of Karsna Polyana.

EOIA relies on the active involvement of many parents who support the electronic registration system or maybe trained as librarians. EOIA also works very closely with local partners in the social, health care and educational sectors.

18 [About Us](#). Open Society Institute Sofia. Available in English

19 [About ABE](#). America for Bulgaria Foundation. Available in English

20 [About Us](#). Roma Education Fund. Available in English

21 [Ministry of Education and Science in Bulgaria](#). Available in English

CHALLENGES REMAIN, BUT ADVOCACY PAYS OFF

Despite positive national policy developments, ECEC services in Sofia tend to be low quality. Roma children are particularly disadvantaged. Local governments are not giving adequate financial support to encourage Roma integration in mainstream education. Where successful integration has been achieved, it is due to the local action of NGOs and community-based organisations. Overall there is still a lack of political will to support Roma inclusion as well as a lack of focus on early childhood development.

A critical role for EOIA is to advocate for equality of access to education for Roma in Sofia. Whilst much still needs to be achieved, EOIA can claim several important successes:

- EOIA was associate member of the Municipal Commission established to manage the electronic system for enrolment. It has supported Roma parents' participation in debates on the 'Rules of Operation' to promote more equal access. As a result, the Municipal Commission accepted to introduce social criteria into the waiting list to prioritise access for children in vulnerable situations.
- Head teachers in kindergartens are now obliged to assist parents in need with their families' profiles according to the 'Rules of Operation' of the e-system.
- Working relationships have been established with other Sofia sub-municipalities with high Roma populations, encouraging discussion on the e-system, enrolment of Roma children and involvement of Roma parents.
- EOIA is negotiating a joint programme with the Regional Inspectorate on Education in Sofia with the aim of securing equal access for Roma children to quality education, and monitoring their attendance rates and the educational achievements.
- EOIA has been a member of the Board of the Centre for Educational Integration of Children and Students from Roma origin and has regular meetings with the education authorities in Sofia, school management boards and the Ministry of Education and Science.

In 2020 the EOIA focused efforts to assist Roma families with enrolment process both for kindergartens and elementary schools, having in mind new rules established to control the pandemic. Since most elementary schools introduced online enrolment processes, EOIA fieldworkers helping young Roma families comply with the deadlines and to successfully fill applications. Additional efforts have been made to promote "Toy library" module, introduced in the frame of the REF's supported program as a successful contribution to responsible parenthood.



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**OPEN SOCIETY
FOUNDATIONS**

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The partnership

- **Eurochild** is a network of almost 200 member organisations from 35 European countries working with and for children throughout Europe, striving for a society that respects the rights of children. Eurochild influences policies to build internal capacities and facilitates mutual learning and exchange practice and research.
- **International Step by Step Association (ISSA)** is an early childhood regional network founded in 1999, which through its programs and services connects the early childhood practice, research, and policy to improve the quality of early childhood systems in Europe and Central Asia. More than 90 ISSA members from 43 countries implement programs and cooperate to ensure quality and equitable early childhood services for young children, especially the most vulnerable.
- **European Public Health Alliance (EPHA)** is Europe's leading NGO alliance advocating for better health. A member-led organization made up of public health NGOs, patient groups, health professionals, and disease groups, EPHA works to improve health, strengthen the voice of public health and combat health inequalities across Europe.
- **Roma Education Fund (REF)** was created in the framework of the Decade of Roma Inclusion in 2005. Its mission and the ultimate goal is to close the gap in educational outcomes between Roma and non-Roma. To achieve this goal, the organization supports policies and programs which ensure quality education for Roma, including the desegregation of education systems.

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National Coordinators: Pomoc Deci (Serbia), Plataforma de Infancia (Spain), Fundação Nossa Senhora do Bom Sucesso (Portugal), Central Union for Child Welfare (Finland), Family, Child, Youth Association (Hungary), Child Rights Alliance (Ireland), Trust for Social Achievement (Bulgaria), Step by Step Center for Education and Professional Development (Romania), Ensemble pour l'Éducation de la Petite Enfance (France).