

MODERNIZATION OF SOCIAL SERVICES IN BULGARIA IN THE CONTEXT OF THE EUROPEAN PILLAR OF SOCIAL RIGHTS

Lilyana Rusanova

Technical University of Gabrovo, Gabrovo, Bulgaria

* Corresponding author: email: lilyana.rusanova@gmail.com

Abstract:

The report examines the modernization of social services in Bulgaria within the context of the European Pillar of Social Rights. It monitors changes in Bulgarian legislation and analyzes the subjective assessments of experts working in the sector. The primary objective of the report is to determine the extent to which existing social services align with the principles of the EPSR, while also tracing how well working experts understand the ongoing modernization in the sector. The report presents the author's definition of social services and categorizes the main types of these services. Based on empirical research, it identifies the main challenges facing social services in Bulgaria, as well as offers recommendations for their future development.

Keywords: social services, social legislation

INTRODUCTION

In 2017, the European Parliament proclaimed the European Pillar of Social Rights (EPSR), which sets out 20 key principles and rights aimed at bringing about convergence and building a fairer and more inclusive Europe [1]. In 2021, the European Commission adopted an action plan setting three ambitious targets by 2030 aimed at employing 78% of the population, participating in training for 60% of all adults and reducing the number of people living at risk of poverty by 15 million [2]. The achievement of the strategic intentions is related to the modernization of social services, as out of a total of 20 principles regulated in the EPSR, 9 are oriented towards social services aimed at vulnerable groups and communities. Thus, at EU level, it is emphasized that social services play a crucial role in the effective implementation of the EPSR, as they respond to the specific needs of individuals, groups and communities who, without social support, would not be able to cope with the existing life situations.

The emphasis on social services clearly indicates that the design, accessibility, and scope of the social services sector will

continue to evolve dynamically across Europe. The contributions of social services will indirectly influence the achievement of ambitious quantitative indicators and the goal of providing more adequate social protection for European citizens.

Given the relevance of this issue, this study makes an analysis of the existing social services in Bulgaria, in the context of the national legislation, and summarizes the subjective assessment of experts working in the social services sector in Bulgaria. The main purpose of the report is to establish to what extent the existing social services correspond to the established principles of the EPSR, on the one hand, and on the other hand, to track the extent to which the working experts understand the ongoing modernization in the sector.

In view of this objective, the report shall be based on quantitative and qualitative methods of gathering information.

The theoretical study focuses on the "new" legislation and is based on strategic documents related to social services in Bulgaria. On this basis, the author presents a typology of social service types and develops a definition of social services in Bulgaria.

The qualitative survey was conducted online, targeting specialists from all services listed in the National Map of Social Services [3]. The survey respondents do not provide sufficient grounds for the comprehensiveness and representativeness of the empirical data, as only 54 specialists across the country were surveyed. In greater detail, the survey includes providers of social services in Bulgaria under delegated state activities. Of these, 52% are NGOs and commercial companies, while 48% are municipalities. The total staff of these providers numbers 1,030 people, serving 3,738 users. The survey covers services offered in specialized environments (44%), residential services (37%), and consulting services (19%). Despite the small sample size, the diversity of service providers and the range of social services they offer somewhat compensate for this limitation. The majority of surveyed experts (98%) reported having more than 15 years of experience in the social services sector, and 85% hold positions as either 'manager' or 'social worker.' This gives us confidence in asserting that the empirical data collected is reliable and aligns with the study's stated objectives.

EXPOSITION

Within the framework of the EU strategy papers, the commitment of the Member States to ensure an effective social policy promoting well-being, employment, quality of work, health, knowledge and skills, security, social ties, civic participation and well-being. [4]. [5].

The review of the strategic documents in Bulgaria clearly shows that the national legislation has been developed in accordance with the approach and concept of the EPSR, and the set quantitative targets correspond to the ambitious intentions raised at EU level. In this context, it is important to note the strategic documents in the field of long-term care [6],[7],[8] child care and others [1] committed to the provision of adequate social services in line with the European Voluntary Quality

Framework[9] and ensuring the achievement of gender equality, long-term care, protection of persons with disabilities, adequate family support and childcare [2].

In addition to the strategic documents from 2020, Bulgaria is part of the group of EU member states where social services are regulated by a separate law. This legislative framework ensures that social services are specifically addressed and aligned with broader European standards, contributing to the modernization and formalization of the social service sector in the country [10].

The Social Services Act transforms the nature of social policy in the country, providing greater clarity, certainty, and predictability in this field. The division of social services into two categories—generally accessible and specialized [10]—aims to overcome the pre-2020 model, which was oriented around the place of service provision but not aligned with modern social relations, demographic structures, or respect for consumer rights.

Within the framework of the law, the following three fundamentally new moments stand out, which affect the design, goals and philosophy of social services: 1) social services begin to be treated independently outside the second safety net, which is mainly oriented towards overcoming poverty and social exclusion. The law achieves personalization, organization and structuring of services according to the needs of the population and the specific user, which significantly expands the opportunities for professional intervention. 2). The law also defines the main functions of social services so as to ensure compliance with the principles of accessibility, integration and continuity of support. From the point of view of the main functions within the framework of the law, the following types of services can be outlined:

1. preventive social services intended for persons or groups where no specific risk has been identified (SSA, Art. 13, para. 2) [10].

2. supporting social services, oriented towards satisfying specific needs, realizing inter-institutional interaction with the labor market, the education and health sector (SSA, Art. 13, para. 3) [10].
3. social services provided through highly specialized support to persons and groups with special needs (SSA, Art. 13, para. 4) [10].

3). The type and capacity of social services are directly related to identified local needs, and municipalities have a leading role in their planning. Thus, the planning of social services at national level is carried out through a National Map of Social Services, considering the number and demographic profile of the population of the respective municipality.

In 2024, the Council of Ministers adopts the National Map of Social Services [3], which indicates the maximum capacity of all services financed by the state budget. Within the framework of the document, it is determined that the total number of users of social services in Bulgaria by maximum capacity is 165110, which means that 2.6% of the population will consume social services until the next update of the document. The names of the social services included in the NMSS clearly indicate the set of activities and allow the following categories of services to be outlined:

- **Services related to information, consulting, training for the realization of rights, skills development and support for the acquisition of work skills.** By their nature, these services are preventive in nature, and this category includes both generally available and specialized services that can be used in combination. In terms of users, these services are intended for all traditional groups subject to protection - from children and families to people with disabilities and the elderly. The provision of these services is based on the individual assessment of the client's

personal account and needs. In this sense, preventive social services in terms of type and design fully comply with the principles of EPSR and are of immediate importance for achieving the objectives related to the formation of skills, ensuring equal access to education and employment, combating poverty and protecting social rights.

- **Services promoting personal autonomy.** Within this group of services, in our opinion, are included assistant support, family services, day care for children, adults and adults, which also contribute to improving the quality of life of users, the formation of skills for independent living, the provision of rehabilitation and therapy and the right to use accompanying services as a result of poor health or unfavorable social environment of users. These services are mainly oriented towards the philosophy of long-term care, as well as the social inclusion of older people, children and adults with disabilities.
- **Residential care for different groups of the population,** such as the elderly, people with disabilities, homeless people, victims of violence, children and young people at vulnerability and risk. These services are typical for all EU countries, as they provide an opportunity for "family care" in a highly specialized environment, and hence a better-quality intervention and personal change of users [4].

The typology of social services in Bulgaria is a matter of the author's opinion and in this regard can be the subject of discussion, but more importantly, from a regulatory point of view, social services in Bulgaria take into account: 1) the philosophy and principles of EPSR, 2) they are indirectly oriented towards the main strategic goals; 3) allow long-term development of the sector and correspond

to the basic needs of the population.

On the other hand, the outlined typology is the basis for the following working definition: *Social services in Bulgaria are oriented to priority groups of the population, apply specialized support and aim at risk prevention, promoting personal autonomy and social change of users. Through a set of activities and measures, social services can contribute to the implementation of the EPSR and the announced strategic goals of the EU, because they take into account national specificities, established traditions and available institutions.*

An important emphasis in the ongoing modernization of social services is also the subjective assessment of the experts working in the sector. In this regard, within the framework of the empirical study, information has been collected regarding the priority groups of the population that need social services now, but which will also be the main users within the next 10 years. The main purpose of the ranking of priority groups of the population is to establish to what extent the opinion of experts in social services coincides with the principles of EPSR, the new legislation and the real social problems in Bulgaria.

Quantitative data show that people with disabilities are defined as a priority group, who, according to 92.4% of the surveyed specialists, are and will be a vulnerable group in need of social services. Therefore, the development of the three categories of services will be crucial to promote the equality of persons with disabilities, as well as to achieve their inclusion in the labour market and ensure adequate health care. Secondly, the surveyed specialists say that children are an extremely important priority group (84.6%), followed by the group of adults (82.7%) and the group of young people – 75%. This ranking is fully in line with the objectives set at EU level, namely investing in skills, combating poverty and social exclusion and prioritizing long-term care. [2]

As the most important areas of influence on the part of social services and as key problems in the field of child welfare, experts point out the following circumstances: according to 82.7% of specialists, the main problems in children are due to divorce of parents, 75% report that children are raised by single parents and parents with low parental capacity, 69.2% believe that parents themselves belong to vulnerable groups. This subjective assessment clearly shows the need for preventive social services that cover both parents and children, including early intervention of risks, better education and more activities in a school environment, the provision of adequate housing and the development of "family services" to compensate for the problems identified.

For young people, the ranking of the frequency of current and future problems, according to experts, is as follows: 76.9% of respondents believe that aggressive behavior, bullying at school, including cyberbullying, is a common phenomenon with future challenges, and according to 63.3%, the number of young people with deviant behavior is increasing. As a consequence of the general picture of social challenges, the problem of early school leaving (61.4%) and early motherhood (60%) is growing. The data clearly orient towards the development of programs oriented towards bringing young people out of the group of vulnerable categories through more interventions in the school environment, the formation of skills and realization in the labor market.

The accumulated empirical information allows us to conclude that the opinion of experts corresponds to the main priorities and strategic goals at EU level for the development of social services. At the same time, the ranked priority groups in Bulgaria reflect the national specifics and the specific social context. Proof of this is the subjective assessment of specialists, according to which overcoming social

isolation is a leading motive for the consumption of social services (65%), followed by health risks (34%) and lack of parenting skills (33%). In this context, 99% of the surveyed specialists indicate that they share human resources, buildings, offices, transport and implement joint projects with similar institutions, and according to 48%, social services in Bulgaria have a common vision, mission and strategies for future development.

Within the framework of the study, the view of the experts regarding the author's typology of social services was studied, in the context of the main challenges for their functioning and future development.

The data obtained outlines the following situation: 1) According to the experts, preventive social services are of utmost importance, their name clearly orients to the type of professional intervention, but the following challenges in their development are also observed: *more than half of the respondents believe that the main problem for the development of these services is the lack of specialists (54%)*. In more detail, all providers declare the need for various specialists, such as social workers, medical specialists, support staff, lawyers, psychologists, pedagogues, etc., as well as the need for more information to consumers about the availability of such services. According to 42% of the workers in the sector, preventive social services are inadequately funded and in order to achieve their goals, better cooperation and cooperation with other institutions is needed, including closer interaction with the sectors of education, healthcare, and the labor market. 2) A similar ranking of challenges is observed in the case of services providing autonomy to consumers and residential-type services, as the lack of specialists and insufficient funding are identified as the main challenges. In these groups of services, the fact that there is increased demand from consumers and a shortage of capacity (42%) is added.

This gives us grounds to assert that social services in Bulgaria, regardless of

their type, face similar difficulties, which are grounds for specific recommendations from the participants in the study. In more detail, the following challenges and recommendations are outlined:

- **The financing of all types of services is outlined as a major problem by specialists.** The reasons for this are the limited opportunities to attract funds from other sources, as well as the lack of sustainability in services and programs that rely on project funding. In this context, 56% of the surveyed experts propose raising financial standards for all types of services.
- **In terms of human resources, the most significant problem is the lack of staff and the excessive workload and service of a large number of users (41%),** which affects the quality of the service and its result. The problem with remuneration is pointed out as a major obstacle to staff development, a cause of demotivation, staff turnover. This problem is outlined by 92.5% of the surveyed specialists, which recommend providing training, improving the training of specialists and providing remuneration corresponding to the responsibilities.
- **In terms of organizational development, planning and sustainability,** the surveyed specialists see a challenge in the frequent changes in the regulatory framework, as well as in the lack of time, instructions and good examples for their adaptation to the current regulations. In this regard, 41.5% share that the legislation in Bulgaria is adequate and allows for the future development of the sector, 45.3% believe that social services are really a priority at state and municipal level. 42% declare that the services are accessible and recognizable to consumers and only 15.1% of the

survey participants determine that the services are evenly distributed across the country.

According to the experts, from a technological point of view, the future development of social services in Bulgaria implies a deeper integration of the professional activities of social institutions with the sectors of education, health care and the labor market (90.6%) and 83% of the specialists predict the need for the creation of new social services intended for new risk groups. These data clearly indicate the need for the development of social services in the direction of providing a set of activities and measures that simultaneously respond to the challenges of a national nature and to the individual needs of consumers. The analysis of the regulatory framework and the accumulated empirical information allows us to establish that *the existing social services in Bulgaria are aimed at priority groups of the population, have an integrative character and contribute to the implementation of EPSR.*

The national specificities and social context in Bulgaria are a major source of new ideas and practices that can ensure an effective social policy promoting well-being, employment, quality of work, health, knowledge and skills, security, social connections, civic participation and well-being.

CONCLUSION

The theoretical review and qualitative analysis of the data carried out in this report clearly show that the typology of the types of social services adopted by the author is recognized among the working experts, and the developed working definition of social services corresponds to the social practice in Bulgaria. The analyzed data and legislation give us grounds to determine that the social services sector in Bulgaria complies with the principles and rights regulated in the European Pillar of Social Rights. The working experts declare a good knowledge of the main priority groups of

the population in need of social protection and are familiar with the ongoing modernization. The main recommendations and weaknesses, according to them, are in the field of funding, the shortage of qualified personnel and the lack of instructions for work, organization and prioritization of social services.

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