

Bulgaria makes slow progress in curbing child abandonment

September 26 2014, by Vessela Sergueva

Bulgaria, which won dark distinction from the United Nations for having the world's highest rate of child abandonment, has made progress but poverty and cultural practice continue to hamper efforts to protect its most vulnerable, an independent report said Friday.

In 2012 the UN children's fund UNICEF report sounded the alarm in the European Union's poorest member state, showing that 780 out of every 100,000 children aged from newborn up to three years—many of them handicapped—had been left to the care of the state.

That report, which exposed the persistence of Communist-era practices, helped drive a UN-assisted campaign to shutter state orphanages, find foster families and offer support for parents—to positive effect.

The total number of children in institutions fell from 5,695 in 2010, to 3,819 in late 2013, the report by the Bulgarian Helsinki Committee rights group said.

The number of new babies being placed in care per year was halved, from 2,455 in 2010 to 1,183 three years later, it said.

According to the BHC report, the government also made some progress on another key objective—finding adoptive parents or foster homes for the many handicapped children who were wards of the state.

In 2010 Bulgaria—which the UN grouped alongside Belarus, Bosnia-

Hercegovina and Russia as states with "extremely high" rates of child abandonment—set itself the goals of completely halting the practice and shutting all of its some 125 state wards by 2014.

But those goals are still a long way off.

"Despite the progress, the door to infant homes has not been shut so far," the BHC said.

Doctors advise abandonment

Poverty and prejudice have made foster families in Bulgaria hard to recruit. Families with handicapped children receive little direct financial support or help with child care, driving them to continue a communist-era practice of giving the children up to the state.

Some nurses and doctors still advise mothers to leave a baby with disabilities in state care, according to a recent UNICEF-commissioned review of Bulgaria's policies.

UNICEF expert Milena Harizanova warned that institutionalisation at any early age could do long-term damage to children. "Blocking the abandonment of babies is key to limiting children's long stay in homes, which harms their psychological and intellectual development," she said in the review.

Adoption, another option

Facing reluctance at home, Bulgaria has turned toward foreign adoptions to find families for its disabled children.

Between 2010 and 2013, a total of 1,377 children—a third of whom had

a disability—were adopted abroad, the Bulgaria Helsinki Committee said. Italy, the United States and France were the main adoptive countries.

But there were still more than 2,000 handicapped children left in homes in late 2013, it added.

And of the 24 homes for children with disabilities operating in Bulgaria, the government has managed to close only one, it added.

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