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| BULGARIA’S INITIATIVES AND BEST PRACTICES IN CHILD ONLINE PROTECTION |
| **Purpose**The purpose of this document is to share the Bulgaria’s initiatives and best practices in child online protection with Member States and Sector Members in line with Resolution 179 (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) by presenting the Bulgarian National Program for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse against Children.**Action required**This document is transmitted to the Council Working Group on child online protection **for information**.\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_**References** [Resolution 179](https://www.itu.int/en/council/Documents/basic-texts-2023/RES-179-E.pdf) (Rev. Bucharest, 2022) – ITU's role in child online protection |

Background

In today's reality, the environment affects the development and well-being of children. Violence is part of the reality in which we live and, unfortunately, children are often victims of violence because of their inability to protect themselves. Children are spending more and more time online, with one in three children now using the Internet worldwide. For this reason and misusing the latest Internet technologies, they can easily become victims of online bullying and other types of violence.

Bulgaria has, therefore, adopted the current National program for the prevention of violence and abuse of children, which focuses on prevention measures and services to reduce the violence against children.

Guiding principles for the implementation of the National Program

The Program rests on the following guiding principles:

– the right of children to be heard and to have their views, which have to be respected and ensured in all decision-making processes;

– respect for the primary role of families in the care and protection of children and in the prevention of all forms of violence;

– ensuring that children's fundamental rights are respected and that their dignity and physical and psychological integrity are respected through a focus on the general prevention of all forms of violence;

– planning support and prevention measures and activities based on official data and primary information.

Structure

The National Program for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse against Children (2022-2026) is envisaged as a five-year strategic document that sets the national policy framework in the field of prevention of violence against children. This includes a mechanism for coordination and communication among state authorities, representatives of civil society and the non-governmental sector; the support of the network of professionals working with children; the support of parents; raising children's awareness for online threads; improving the regulatory framework; protecting children against violence especially online.

The program consists of five strategic objectives:

1 ensuring effective protection from violence and harmful influences on children online;

2 ensuring an appropriate legal framework for child protection against all forms of violence and exploitation;

3 effective response and investigation of cases of violence and exploitation;

4 improving the professional capacity of professionals working with children and the awareness of children and their families. Supporting parents;

5 improving inter-institutional cooperation and collaboration to protect children from violence with a focus on possible online threads.

All of the five identified strategic objectives for sustainable results in the prevention of violence and abuse of children are achieved through 28 clear and specific operational objectives defined based on the different target groups the program is aimed at.

Child online protection

One of these 28 operational objectives relates to ensuring children's right to protection from violence through information and communication by following tasks:

– developing digital-media literacy of students in classes and extracurricular activities, including through the development and implementation of digital innovations and platforms for the development of digital-media literacy;

– receiving and handling reports of online child abuse through the National Safer Internet Centre Hotline;

– training students of all educational stages on topics related to online risks;

– conducting a Cyber Scouts training programme in schools;

– conducting an awareness-raising campaign for parents, teachers and professionals on online risks and prevention of online violence.

In addition to these measures, activities related to increasing the capacity of educational professionals and parents through training and the development of resources related to online risks for children on the web are included.

National Information Campaign for the Prevention of Violence and Child Abuse

In 2024, a National Information Campaign for the Prevention of Violence and Child Abuse was launched under the slogan "Be Brave, Be Good", which aims to guarantee the right to protection from all kinds of violence, including online, for all children, especially children at high risk of vulnerability, as well as to mobilize the community and bring about a change in public attitudes. The activities foreseen in the campaign, which are implemented in partnership with responsible ministries, institutions and municipalities, are:

– children's essay and photography competition on the theme "The world is a better place without violence" – more than 720 entries from children were received;

– outdoor sports activities – more than 15 000 children participated;

– planting a tree in each municipality, with a message to children against violence;

– illuminating landmark buildings in the municipalities with a message of fight against violence;

– creation of video messages by celebrities on violence and its harmful consequences.

Action Plans

For the implementation of the National Program for the Prevention of Violence and Abuse against Children, two-year plans are being prepared, as well as the follow-up of their implementation. By the end of 2024, an Action Plan for the second period (2025-2026) should be finalized.

Expected results

With the adoption and implementation of the National program for the prevention of violence and abuse against children, as well as with the implementation of the Action Plans, the following results are expected to be achieved:

– reduction of violence by 20 per cent;

– reduction in cases of exploitation – forced labour and sexual exploitation;

– increase awareness and sensitization in society on children's issues;

– zero tolerance policy for all forms of violence especially online;

– raising students' awareness and knowledge of risks on the Internet. Formation of skills for safe use of the web and recognition of fake news;

– gain knowledge and skills to recognise online risks, how to react and whom to report to in case of online violence;

– improved reporting system and coordination between institutions;

– increased capacity of professionals working with children to prevent online violence against children on the Internet;

– ensure appropriate legislation for the protection of children against violence and exploitation.

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